

*Howard Louthan*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3413-2437>

University of Minnesota

*Polonia mea est: Erasmus*  
and the Writing of the Polish Reformation.  
Maciej Ptaszyński, *Reformacja*  
*w Polsce a dziedzictwo Erazma z Rotterdamu,*  
Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu  
Warszawskiego, 2018, 746 pp.

In September 1524, the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus wrote a letter to his friend William Warham, the harried Archbishop of Canterbury who, despite his advanced years, was attempting to hold the English Church together. Erasmus, though, had his mind elsewhere. More precisely, his thoughts were on the other side of the continent. Never known for his humility, he proudly declared to Warham, “Poland is devoted to me.” Though there may have been a hint of exaggeration in Erasmus’s smug declaration, it cannot be denied that he had a growing fan base in the Polish kingdom. Printers busily produced editions of his work. For many Polish students, a visit to Erasmus was a critical component of their education abroad while some of the kingdom’s most distinguished churchmen, merchants, and nobility corresponded regularly with him. Bishop Jan Dantyszczek purportedly hung a Holbein portrait of Erasmus in his palace. This fascination with the Dutch humanist continues in many respects today. Research on Erasmus and his relationship with Poland has become a minor cottage industry. The most recent example is Maciej Ptaszyński’s superb new study *Reformacja w Polsce*. Ptaszyński uses

Erasmus, his connections, his influence, and his legacy within Poland, as the organizing framework of this ambitious monograph charting the evolution of the Reformation within the kingdom.

How does one write a history of the Reformation in the Polish context? Before embarking on this major study, Ptasiński reflected long and hard on this seemingly simple question. While he discusses in some detail the historiographical landscape of the Polish Reformation, his approach to this subject perhaps stands in greatest contrast to the work of Janusz Tazbir whose work is especially influential in the Anglophone world. Without dismissing theological innovation altogether, Tazbir minimized it. Instead, he viewed the Polish Reformation as a grand intellectual adventure for many of the Polish nobility, an adventure of innovation and novelty that eventually wound down in the seventeenth century. Others in the Anglophone community have echoed his assessment. Robert Evans once characterized the Reformation in this region as weak and anemic. The freedoms of the nobility made it easy for them to try on ideas and experiment with new ways of thinking and relating to the divine. As opposed to the experience of Protestants in the French and German lands, Poles did not pay for their religious freedom with blood. Their gains came too quickly leading to a superficial Reformation whose progress could be halted and easily reversed.

Ptasiński, in contrast, follows a different approach. He gives more credit to ideas and takes his theology seriously. This basic presupposition informs his scholarship in a number of concrete ways. In terms of source material, he bases his work on the very rich collection of correspondence between Poles and European reformers. He has carefully mined the letters of Jan Dantyszek, Jan Łaski, Stanisław Hozjusz, Andrzej Zbrzydowski, and many others within Poland. At the same time, he has worked through the correspondence of those on the outside: Erasmus, Melancthon, Calvin, Bullinger, and other "Poland watchers" who closely followed developments in the kingdom so critically positioned on the edge of Christendom. In terms of secondary material and methodological orientation, Ptasiński reflects the influence of neighboring Germany and its lively school of Reformation studies, not surprising for a scholar whose first book examined the emergence of the Lutheran clergy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Pomerania. Historians such as Volker Leppin, Luise Schorn-Schütte, and Irene Dingel appear frequently in the notes. At the same time as an intellectual historian, he acknowledges his debt to the Cambridge

School. In a manner akin to Skinner and Pocock, Ptaszyński has sought to anchor the ideas and texts he examines in a specific historical context without reducing them to mere epiphenomena.

Ptaszyński adeptly handles matters of chronology. The book technically moves from 1518 to 1566, from the year after Luther's public break with Rome to a period characterized by internal fissures within Poland's Calvinist community and the official acceptance of the decrees of Trent by King Sigismund II Augustus. No serious historian of the Reformation today, however, would put firm start dates and end points to any consideration of this period. Indeed, the dividing line most scholars draw between late medieval and early modern Europe has become progressively blurred and increasingly irrelevant. One of the book's great merits is the author's clear understanding of the medieval legacy that continued to exert such an important influence over Poland's Erasmian reformers and offer potential solutions to its ecclesiastical crisis. Ptaszyński points to a long history of anti-clericalism that continued to fuel the discontent if not outright anger of the gentry and nobility in the sixteenth century. Think of Mikołaj Rej for instance. Of even greater significance was the conciliar tradition that resonated so deeply in fifteenth-century Polish society. At the Council of Basel (1431–1449), a member of the Polish delegation had boldly claimed that the pope was neither head of the Church nor vicar of Christ but rather a minister of the whole and like all humans sinful and fallible even when executing the duties of his office. More formally, figures such as Paweł Włodkowic and Stanisław of Skarbimierz wrote important treatises that sought to circumscribe the powers of the papacy. These ideas came to the fore once more in the following century as the kingdom's Erasmian reformers sought a *via media* in an increasingly contentious confessional environment.

As mentioned earlier, the framework around which Ptaszyński has organized his material is Erasmus and the Erasmian legacy. This can be tricky. One runs the risk of lazily reducing Erasmianism to fuzzy notions of theological accommodation that can be applied to a broad range of situations that perhaps do not merit this designation. Erasmus himself was notoriously vague on doctrinal positions, and those who would describe themselves as his followers did not always share his same theological convictions. Luther once quipped that Erasmus was as slippery as an eel, for no one except God could grasp him, so guardedly did the humanist express his true beliefs. Additionally, Ptaszyński's study is so big and sprawling (it does run to 750 pages)

that no single construct could organizationally corral the immense amount of material he includes. These reservations notwithstanding, he is generally successful with this scheme. After an introductory section that offers a broader review of Erasmus across the European landscape, he turns to Poland and highlights a large circle of supporters who had some contact or drew some type of inspiration from the Dutch humanist. To his credit, Ptaszyński does not depict a homogenous group of bookish intellectuals who consistently parroted the same ideas. He recognizes the rivalries and divisions between figures such as the irenic Frycz Modrzewski and the arch-Catholic reformer Hozjusz, between the powerful Łaski family and Piotr Tomicki, Andrzej Krzycki, and their allies. Ptaszyński's arguments in this respect call to mind the work of Ethan Shagan, who once argued that the English *via media* was no abstract ideal benignly imposed by benevolent political masters to calm religious tempers. As he highlights especially in Chapter 3, charting a middle course during Sigismund the Old's reign was no easy task. Finding a Polish *via media* in such a challenging environment demanded much from the kingdom's leaders who were constantly reacting to changing political circumstances even as they feuded and competed with each other for power and influence.

Although *Reformacja w Polsce* features a massive cast of figures who contributed to Poland's Reformation, Ptaszyński does highlight one individual in particular who in many ways embodies the heart of his argument. If the book does have a hero, it is the enigmatic statesman and humanist Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (1503–1572). Frycz is an interesting choice but one who presents a number of challenges to the historian. First are the problems of sources. Though his literary legacy is significant, what has come down to us today are primarily his treatises. His scattered letters do not come close to matching the massive correspondence we have from other Erasmusians such as Jan Dantyszek or the younger Jan Łaski. Then there is Frycz himself. In recent years some scholars have challenged his broader importance for the period. Janusz Tazbir argued that though Frycz's utopian schemes helped make him a popular figure of study during the Communist era, his actual significance during the Reformation period was more limited. By the time of his death he was a marginal figure ending his days in isolation. More recently, though, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in Frycz. Though the philosophers are leading this reassessment, Ptaszyński has added his own voice as a historian. Here

his contributions are most welcome as he carefully follows the growth and development of Frycz's thought while scrupulously noting the reactions his scholarship and proposals elicited.

Ptaszyński outlines at least three phases of Frycz's career. There are his early writings as a legal and social reformer addressing the inequities of his society. In this capacity Frycz is best known for several treatises on homicide. Towards the end of this period he began to turn his attention to affairs of Church and state with an important memorandum on Trent (1546). This second period culminated with his most celebrated work, the five-volume *Commentariorum de Republica emendanda* (full text, Basel, 1554). The most controversial part of this project was his volume on the Church that argued for a thorough reform of the institution, proposals that unleashed a major backlash. The final stage of his career and the one perhaps most difficult to interpret was occasioned by the growing spilt within the Calvinist community precipitated by the Antitrinitarian controversies. Frycz wrote a series of essays collectively known as the *Sylva* in an effort to restore unity. These fascinating texts are a demanding read, for they require mastery of complicated theological matters. Ptaszyński here is a reliable guide through a bewildering thicket of doctrinal and philosophical detail, but he never loses sight of the broader argument. Frycz's handling of this material was indicative of a far-reaching theological and intellectual shift occurring in this period that ultimately doomed any chance of an Erasmian solution to Poland's growing confessional crisis. As Ptaszyński observes, there is a studied ambiguity to the *Sylva*. In good humanist fashion, Frycz outlined a variety of positions on the nature of the Godhead without clearly identifying his own views. This manner of handling theological debate, however, was one that was out of touch with the new mood of the day. The suppleness of humanist debate and the ambiguities of its rhetoric was giving way to more rigid patterns of argument that emphasized theological certainty and precision. In such a world Frycz and his Erasmian allies occupied an ever-diminishing place.

*Reformacja w Polsce* is a marvelous book. Its scope and aims are ambitious, its achievement impressive. Ptaszyński has worked through a mammoth body of evidence to present this compelling account of the first stage of Poland's Reformation that ended in the second half of the sixteenth century as confessional boundaries were hardening. Implicit in Ptaszyński's work is an argument against a tradition of Polish exceptionalism. Though he is not always explicit, his work

naturally invites comparison. For example, he develops the theme of “late Reformation,” a concept that merits further investigation and study. Though reform was an ever present dynamic in the first half of the sixteenth century, Poland’s Protestant churches organized themselves relatively late. In this way Erasmianism provided those interested in reform a broad umbrella under which they could work without necessarily committing themselves to one specific Protestant confession. Here what is happening in Poland offers a number of intriguing parallels. In Scotland Archbishop John Hamilton (1512–1571) attempted to steer a middle course in the 1540s and 1550s before John Knox ultimately nullified those efforts. On the continent one could point to France or places such as the archdiocese of Cologne or the duchy of Cleves where reformers sought intermediate positions. But in all these cases including Poland, change could be delayed but never stopped. A world where confessional differences were sharp and distinct for both Protestants and Catholics was the certain direction of the future.

Of any study of this nature there are inevitably smaller questions that could have been more fully examined. Apart from two brief mentions there is no real assessment of Jan Kochanowski, arguably Poland’s greatest writer of the sixteenth century and an individual often elevated as an epitome of moderation. Kochanowski’s activity, however, does extend beyond the book’s main chronological parameters. *Reformacja w Polsce* is also very much of a top-down examination of the Reformation with its focus on society’s elites and its analysis of institutions, politics, and intellectual developments. The author should make no apologies as this methodological approach does allow him to offer a sweeping and comprehensive appraisal of this critical period. Future studies, though, with a more limited and targeted approach could elucidate aspects of Ptasiński’s analysis. A good social history of the period would be a marvelous complement. Such concluding comments, though, indicate the extent to which *Reformacja w Polsce* should become a standard survey of the critical religious developments that transformed Poland in the sixteenth century.